

# Breaking the Spell

## *Beauty and the Beast* and Plato's Prisoner

*Nathan Mueller and Leilani Mueller*

"But don't you see, this is the girl we have been waiting for! This is the one who will break the spell!" exclaims Lumière, the candlestick, to Cogsworth, the grumpy clock. And why shouldn't Cogsworth be grumpy? Cogsworth, Lumière, and all the occupants of the Prince's castle have been reduced to mere items of furniture under a wide-ranging spell that has also transformed their master into a fearsome beast. For "there was no love in his heart," explains the enchantress. By the time we are introduced to Cogsworth and Lumière in Disney's *Beauty and the Beast*, they are already in danger of becoming permanent household fixtures: the footmen to articles of royal furniture, and the kitchen staff to pots, pans, and more. Hope is very nearly lost, for (as the voice-over intones) "Who could learn to love a beast?" How in the world is a terrible spell like this to be broken – if ever?

### The Enchanting Trap

With the Beast and his staff thus confined, we wonder whether they are destined to live out their days in this shadowy existence. Is this really their fate? After all, they're still alive. They can still talk. Lumière, the Spoons, and Forks, can cancan with the best of them. Moreover, the Beast's strength is positively overwhelming; as is demonstrated when the Beast single-handedly drives off a pack of wolves in just a few moments. And yet the existence of these characters is

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shadowy at best. Early in the film, Belle finds her way to the forbidden West Wing of the castle. The muted colors and deteriorating décor depict for us what life is really like for the cursed ones who live in the castle. Everything is decaying towards death. The glass-encased, enchanted red rose, loses one petal at a time, heralding the dire straits of those who live in the castle. They are trapped – trapped because of a lack of love.

Naturally, of course, there are different ways of being trapped. The Beast and his attendants are still largely able to move at will about the castle. So they are not trapped in a straightforward sense. Rather, the Beast and his attendants are imprisoned in a deeper, more fundamental way. Trapped in the form of a candelabra, clock, teacup, teapot, and feather duster, Lumière, Cogsworth, Chip, Mrs. Potts, and Plumette are not simply confined to their household forms (loosely corresponding to their prior roles when working for the Beast), they undergo and experience a significant diminishing of their personal capacities. Bounded by their new external constraints, the members of the Beast's household can no longer fully express their capacities as persons. Lumière longs to kiss his love Plumette. Not surprisingly, the embrace between candlestick and feather duster is cold, feathery, and barren – far, far short of what it would have been had they been in full possession of their human capacities.

### Freeing Plato's Prisoner

In another world far, far removed (in time, place, and imagination) from the Beast and his castle, Plato (428–348 BCE) was telling the tale of another prisoner – shackled and trapped inside a cave, accompanied by scores of his fellow human beings in the same predicament. “Imagine,” he says, the state of these prisoners: “human beings living in an underground, cave-like dwelling, with an entrance a long way up.”<sup>1</sup> Unlike the Beast and his servants, however, these prisoners have “been here since childhood, fixed in the same place, with their necks and legs fettered, able to only see in front of them because their bonds prevent them from turning their heads around.”<sup>2</sup>

While light shines in from the entrance above, the prisoners reside in the depths of the cave away from the light. Behind the prisoners is a fire, which casts shadows on the wall, creating a shadow show of people holding various artifacts, “made out of stone, wood, and every material.”<sup>3</sup> All the prisoners know of hammers, chairs, and other artifacts

are the shadows cast by these objects on the stone wall in front of them. All they know of light is the fire's flickering shadow. They are trapped believing "that the truth is nothing other than the shadows of those artifacts."<sup>4</sup> Like the Beast and his servants, these prisoners are shackled in a state that doesn't allow them to be what humans were meant to be – people who encounter a real world and thereby possess knowledge instead of ignorance.

To be a prisoner either in Plato's cave or in the Beast's castle is a form of existence no one would desire. And yet the story of *Beauty and the Beast* – in particular, the spell that imprisoned the Beast and his servants – is a tale as old as time. It is our common human experience: our recognition that we are shackled by ignorance and unfulfilled potential, and our desperate desire to escape. Unfortunately, however, breaking the chains and ending the spell is no easy feat.

### **"What If She's the One?"**

"What if?" is the all-important first question in breaking a spell. Recall that moment Belle first walks into the castle. Slowly, the large door to the castle creaks open. "Hello," she calls into the seemingly empty corridor. In the shadows, the furniture servants observe and whisper hopefully, "What if she's the one? The one to break the spell?" They remember the conditions of the enchantress's curse. The curse can only be broken when the Beast learns to love another and be loved in return. This particular "What if" becomes a real spell-breaking possibility. For just as the Beast and his household companions represent a cave-like imprisonment, Belle represents in her person the two ideals necessary to break the spell: *love* (which drew her to the castle to find her father) and *beauty* (which can compel the love of another). The towns people sing: "It's no wonder that her name means beauty. Her looks have got no parallel." Thus, viewing Belle as representative of beauty is indeed an intended consequence of her name.

In the Allegory of the Cave, Plato imagines a moment in which one of the prisoners is set free from his chains and is "suddenly compelled to stand up."<sup>5</sup> However, Plato never tells us what breaks the chains and compels the prisoner to stand. Plato's silence here is noteworthy. What is it that breaks the chains? The answer lies in the context. The story of the cave and its prisoners appears in a conversation between Socrates (470–399 BCE) – Plato's teacher and the lead character in

many of his dialogues – and various discussion partners. Socrates tells the allegory to teach this lesson: due to a lack of a proper education, people neither desire the truth nor do they understand reality as it truly is. All they ever experience are the fleeting and flickering shadows of reality: imitations and copies of eternal realities. Because they can't conceive of anything apart from their sensory world of shadows, they have no desire to move out of the cave. But how is that desire to be awakened? The answer lies in another of Plato's dialogues, and provides the clue for how the Beast, who has "no love in his heart," can love and be loved.

### Beauty and Love's Pursuit

In Plato's *Symposium*, a handful of Greek gentlemen gather to celebrate the recent victory of Agathon (a playwright) in a prestigious competition the night before. As they recline and drink in celebration, they decide to have each member of the party give a speech in honor of Eros, the god of love.

When it is his turn to speak, Socrates recounts a story told him by the priestess Diotima. According to the story, Eros, the god of love, was the son of Poros and Penia – the god of plenty and the goddess of poverty. Eros was conceived on the day Aphrodite was born and, as a result, Eros always follows beautiful Aphrodite.<sup>6</sup> As Plato puts it, Eros "always lives with need," (an inheritance from his mother) and always "[schemes] after the beautiful and the good" (an inheritance from his father).<sup>7</sup>

One way to understand the nature of love, then, is to see it as existing between two realms. Eros exists as a daemon, standing midway between the realm of the gods and the realm of men – halfway between lack and plenty, between ignorance and knowledge. As the son of poverty, he recognizes his need. As the son of resource, he strives toward what is lacking. However, his status as a daemon makes him unable to completely attain that which he pursues. Eros, then, has the power to draw us ever upward and onwards, closer to the object of our love. But what is the proper object of Eros?

Diotima insists that what motivates Eros is beauty. Eros was conceived on the day that incomparably beautiful Aphrodite was born. Eros must therefore pursue beauty. Therefore, since Eros seeks beauty and Eros is love, it follows that love seeks after beauty as well. But then, given that Eros can never fully attain that which he pursues, his pursuit of beauty is never complete. Nevertheless, love's pursuit of beauty (Diotima tells us) is characterized by ever more fully realized

stages, allowing us to ascend a ladder from the realm of the physical and transient to that of the immaterial and eternal.

Love begins, says Socrates, by aiding us to love beauty as it is found in one body. It then teaches us to love that same beauty in all bodies, and (by a process of abstraction) as it's found in other minds, discourse, laws, truth, and knowledge. And thus we learn to love beauty itself – that is, beauty apart from its being found in the world. The final step is our seeing the Beautiful in itself. Assisting us in this climb, this pursuit of Beauty, is the work of Eros. However, given his origins, this pursuit is fated to remain incomplete – a lifelong pursuit that brings riches at every turn, yet never fully reaches its goal.

But what has all of this to do with the Beast – cursed because he “had no love in his heart”? How does someone who has no love become a person who loves? The answer is Beauty. Eros, by its very nature and origin, follows Beauty whenever it is perceived. We can even say that Beauty *causes* Eros – a fact reinforced by Eros's conception on the day beautiful Aphrodite was born. Beauty compels love, because love is only felt or experienced when there is an encounter with something beautiful.

There is a sense, then, in which the enchantress's curse simply turns the Beast into what he had already become: a brute animal with no need for beauty and no feelings of love. His transformation symbolizes the fact that he is indifferent to beauty and its upward pull to goodness, the very desire that separates human beings from other animals. Living apart from the appropriate desire and need for love, the Beast in effect gave up his full humanity. Indeed, we wouldn't be too far wrong if we thought of him as having cursed himself, and the enchantress as merely having revealed to him the consequence of his choice to ignore beauty, goodness, and love.

To become human again, something must compel the Beast's love – something beautiful. Love never happens without an encounter with beauty.

## Encountering Beauty

“There must be something there that wasn't there before,” sing Lumière, Cogsworth, and Mrs. Potts as they watch the progressively enamored interactions between Belle and the Beast. In one such encounter, the two are feeding birds and Belle looks over to see little birds perching on the Beast's ungainly frame. She smiles and looks away. “There must be something there that wasn't there before.”

“What’s there, mamma?” asks Chip while Mrs. Potts looks down at him with the knowingness of a teapot who has experienced love. “Shh. I’ll tell you when you are older,” she responds. At this point, the servants are hopeful and expectant. They can finally see a way for the spell to break. What they see, and what Chip is too young to understand, is that the Beauty and the Beast are each beginning to recognize and experience the beauty they each find in the other.

There are multiple aspects to Beauty. The iconic scene when Belle and the Beast meet at the top of the stairs to dance reveals the outward aspect of beauty – the first of Diotima’s stages of ascent. Belle shimmers in gold and the Beast is ennobled in his blue tailored suit. The music swells as they sweep down the stairs. The high ceilings and the lighting radiate outward beauty. Then the Beast walks Belle outside and we are shown the inward aspect of beauty: its second stage.

Belle wants to know how her father is doing, and the Beast presents her with a magical mirror that allows her to see him. But when Belle sees the danger her father is in, the Beast releases her. Belle’s loving care for her father and the Beast’s willingness to set her free are vivid displays of inward beauty: the beauty of the soul. In Belle’s relationship with the Beast we see the rungs of Diotima’s ladder of love.

Shortly thereafter, as the Beast leans over the enchanted rose, he says to Cogsworth: “I let her go.” Cogsworth exclaims, “You what? How could you do that?” The Beast replies, “I had to.” “Yes, but why?” asks Cogsworth. The curse is on the brink of permanency and Cogsworth droops and his hope fades. “Because ... I love her,” says the Beast. Having ascended ever higher on Diotima’s ladder, he might just as well have said, “I find her beautiful – both inside and out.”

## Love Sets Things Free

The questions “Who could learn to love a beast?” and “What breaks the chains and compels the prisoner to stand?” are two ways of asking the very same question: “How can human beings become who they are intended to be?”

After the fight with the villagers and Gaston, the Beast lies seemingly defeated and close to death. Belle caresses his head, tears in her eyes. The surrounding atmosphere is gray and rainy, mirroring the loss of something beautiful that approaches Belle and the Beast. “At least I got to see you one last time,” the Beast gasps before what seems to be his death.

When the Beast turns to Belle in order to “see” her, he shows how much he has grown in his capacity to desire beauty. It shows that he has been changed by her, and with his death fast approaching, he recognizes the experience of beauty he has had while in her presence. She has led him upwards. And when love rightly pursues beauty with spell-breaking, chains-releasing, compelling power, the story does not end with death.

“Please don’t leave me. I love you,” Belle calls out, leaning over the Beast’s body. Something profound has taken place. If he hadn’t learned to love and be loved in return, the Beast would have remained a beast – forever. If he hadn’t desired beauty enough to allow himself to be loved, he would have remained a beast. If Belle hadn’t found the Beast’s soul beautiful, there would have been no release from his prison.

With Belle’s declaration of love, light pierces the darkness of the scene and sparkles all around. It reminds us of Plato’s prisoner when he finds his chains broken, and stands to face the source of the previously hidden light. Belle sits back and watches the Beast change before her eyes. He is a prisoner freed. With light emanating out of him from within, the radiance of his beauty slowly frees the castle from its curse. Belle can only watch as the spell breaks before her eyes. The Beast, like Plato’s prisoner, has been released.

## Happily Ever After?

“Are they going to live happily ever after?” Chip asks his mother. Belle and the Beast, now turned into a handsome prince, twirl across the ballroom. In the background, the chorus rings out, “Certain as the sun.” When beauty is experienced, love is provoked, and spells break.

Chip’s mother looks at him and giggles, “Of course my dear,” she sighs with a look of happy contentment. “Of course.”

## Notes

1. Plato. (1997). Republic. In: *Plato: Complete Works* (ed. J. M. Cooper), 1132 (514a–b). Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Co.
2. Ibid., p. 1132 (514a).
3. Ibid. (514b–c).
4. Ibid., p. 1133 (515c).
5. Ibid. (515c–d).
6. Plato, *Symposium*, in *Plato: Complete Works*, p. 486 (203d).
7. Ibid.